

# A Grand Canyon Railway

## Project for a New Century—the 20th

**T**he century was about to end. No, it was not 1999, rather 1899, and the talk of the northern Arizona Territory was a railroad then under construction to the Grand Canyon. It bore the name “Santa Fe and Grand Canyon Railroad” because its purpose was to connect the Santa Fe Pacific Railroad (a subsidiary of the Atchison, Topeka & Santa Fe (AT&SF) Railway), at Williams, Arizona, with the South Rim of the Grand Canyon, roughly 63 miles by the route of the survey to the north. It was typical for a railroad in that era to adopt as its name the names of each end of its line.

This was not the first time there had been talk of a railway penetrating the Grand Canyon country. Some years earlier, Robert Brewster Stanton and his survey party took boats the length of the Colorado River in the Grand Canyon to lay out his proposed Denver, Colorado Canyon and Pacific Railroad, but that line through the bottom of the canyon never got off the drawing boards. It would have been feasible, given enough time and treasure, to build a railroad through the canyon, but no cities, towns, mines, industries, or sources of passenger traffic existed along the bottom of the canyon to offer such a railroad freight and passengers. So, what

may have been feasible from an engineering standpoint (although at great cost) was not practical from a financial standpoint. No railroad ever would run the length of the bottom of the Grand Canyon.

Hauling tourists to the South Rim of the canyon seemed an entirely different proposition. By the mid-1890s, financial interests in Flagstaff, northern Arizona’s principal city, proposed a Flagstaff and Grand Canyon Railroad and a destination health resort “spa” on the rim of the canyon, to be built and operated by the railroad. But that proposal, too, lapsed in the depression of the mid-1890s.

In 1897, a Prescott, Arizona, citizen named William Owen “Bucky” O’Neill proposed building a railroad from Williams, a town some distance west of Flagstaff on the Santa Fe Pacific, to the Grand Canyon. At first, he had tried to interest the Santa Fe System in building such a branch, which, based on 10 years of intermittent prospecting in the canyon, he thought shipments of mineral ore—especially copper—would support. But both the AT&SF and the Santa Fe Pacific had just emerged from bankruptcy, and their boards of directors proved conservative and reluctant to invest in any branch lines. O’Neill finally interested a Chicago investment firm, Lombard, Goode & Company, in building the railroad, and it set up the Tusayan Development Company to handle the actual construction of the railroad and development of the copper mines (which, as it turned out, contained very rich copper but very little of it). Between 1897 and mid-1900, the company completed track to within about eight miles of the projected destination along the rim of the canyon before ending up in bankruptcy court. Over the objections of its president, who wanted nothing to do with this Santa Fe & Grand Canyon Railroad (SF&GCRR), the Santa Fe System board of directors had advanced the venture a lot of second-hand rail for which it had not been paid. Then, in 1901, when the bankruptcy court put

*In the winter of 1913, a double-headed passenger train approaches the depot at Grand Canyon, Arizona.*



the SF&GCRR up for sale, the Santa Fe System bought it as the only way to recoup the cost of the 56 track miles of rail they had advanced the line. Then, the Santa Fe System went on to complete the SF&GCRR to the rim in mid-September 1901, and reorganized it as a nearly wholly owned subsidiary, the Grand Canyon Railway.

At the rim, in what the railroad called “Grand Canyon Station” and eventually simply “Grand Canyon” (now Grand Canyon Village), the railroad had acquired the old Bright Angel Hotel. But, needing a more upscale hostelry, it constructed between 1902 and January 1905, a large, rustic log destination resort hotel called El Tovar. The company had intended to convert the old Bright Angel into employee quarters. But, with access by rail available, passenger traffic to the Grand Canyon escalated so fast that the company needed a resort for less wealthy tourists to complement El Tovar. It converted the Bright Angel Hotel into Bright Angel Camp, a lower-cost tourist facility at the rim, and constructed new employee quarters elsewhere.

Then the railway began to promote travel to the Grand Canyon. The Santa Fe System actually had begun doing so in 1891, publishing a little booklet that year and the next called “The Grand Cañon of the Colorado River.” Bankruptcy interrupted its publication, which did not resume until 1897. It then continued each year, with a change in title to “The Grand Cañon of Arizona,” through 1901. Beginning in 1902, after acquisition and completion of the line, the railway put out a much more impressive book on the Grand Canyon, available at first in both hard and soft cover, and reprinted in 1906 and 1909 in paperback editions. Beginning also in 1902, the railway published each year—sometimes with multiple printings—a smaller pamphlet called “Titan of Chasms,” which continued until interrupted by World War I. (The railroad also issued an order in 1902 changing the spelling from the Spanish “cañon” to “canyon” in all publications and documents.) In later years, it published a pamphlet called “Grand Canyon Outings” which, between the two world wars, superseded “Titan of Chasms.”

The Fred Harvey Company had been allied with the Santa Fe System for years, operating depot lunch rooms and hotels and, later, dining cars on the Santa Fe, and giving that railroad a reputation for the best food service and hostelries

along any railroad in the United States.

Beginning with the opening of El Tovar in January 1905, the Fred Harvey firm took over operation of the company's hotels, lodges, souvenir shops, and restaurants at the Grand Canyon. The railroad owned and maintained all the buildings and structures; the Fred Harvey firm operated them. But while the railroad itself published the booklet on El Tovar annually from 1905 until World War I, the Fred Harvey firm began to issue its own parallel series of promotional publications on the Grand Canyon. One such publication, “Trails, Drives and Saddle Horses,” was soon retitled “Trails and Automobile Drives,” as motor vehicles made their appearance on the roads around the Grand Canyon.

But it was the railway that, in 1914, constructed the West Rim Drive. Around the same time, it improved and extended existing roads stretching east to Grand View and ultimately to “Painted Desert View,” then ran tours along both rims in coaches or buggies and later motor buses, and rented horses to groups staying at El Tovar.

By the time of American entry into World War I, the railway had developed Grand Canyon as a destination resort to replace its failed destination resort in New Mexico, the Montezuma Hotel (briefly renamed the Phoenix having been rebuilt after one of two major fires), at Las Vegas Hot Springs. By then, Fred Harvey, if not the Santa Fe System, had begun to think in terms of turning the Grand Canyon into a national park, and, in 1919, succeeded in getting Congress and the president to create Grand Canyon National Park. The railroad had already been in place for 18 years, and its design for the development at Grand Canyon Station formed a core around which the National Park Service has had to plan, including in the General Management Plan now in progress.

For, in the century since its inception, the railroad itself, its tracks, its hotels and lodges, its employee quarters, its mule barns, its tourist rest stops and souvenir shops, its Phantom Ranch at the bottom of the Canyon, even its powerhouse and laundry building, have all become historic. A number of the buildings are National Historic Landmarks due to their distinguished rustic architecture, which set a model that inspired the National Park Service's own rustic designs.

After World War II, the automobile and interstate highways cut so far into railroad pas-

*Grand Canyon depot, April 1915. Courtesy Interstate Commerce Commission.*

senger traffic that it became a losing proposition for the company. Finally, in 1968, the AT&SF, which had absorbed the Grand Canyon Railway in the 1920s, discontinued the passenger train to the Grand Canyon. For a few more years, the railway operated freight trains, making a modest profit on the long haul of uranium ore from the Orphan Mine to Cañon City, Colorado. The company ran its last train to the rim, a work train, in the summer of 1974. The tracks lay idle from 1974 until 1989, and several miles of track were even dismantled and removed.

But, beginning about 1984, one of several efforts to purchase and revive the railway, the one commenced by the firm Railroad Resources of Phoenix with financial backing from Max Biegert, started to make some progress. Railroad Resources ultimately failed, but its principal investor, Biegert, took on the project himself. The company acquired three steam locomotives that had historically operated on the Lake Superior and Ishpeming (LS&I) Railroad near the Great Lakes. In the summer of 1989, a second "Grand Canyon Railway" company, resurrecting the name of the Santa Fe System's original subsidiary, undertook repair of 64 miles of tracks, and clear-cut the trees which had grown like weeds in the passenger yard at Grand Canyon, damaging the tracks and platforms. It rebuilt LS&I Locomotive No. 18, and reconditioned "Harriman"-style turtle-back-roofed commuter coaches built for the Southern Pacific to operate on the peninsula south of San Francisco early in the century.

Painted a most-appropriate Pullman olive green with gold lettering—calling forth memories of Santa Fe "heavyweight" passenger cars of the years between the world wars and before the introduction of the later, stainless steel "streamlined" trains—these cars would make, behind a steam locomotive, an attractive train that evoked memories of historic railroading in the United States. The new Grand Canyon Railway scheduled its first train to operate on September 17, 1989, the 88th anniversary of the first train to reach Grand Canyon.



Since that time, the second Grand Canyon Railway has been a roaring success. The company put a second, and eventually a third steam locomotive into service, as well as several diesel-electric locomotives. For awhile it operated a wonderful heavyweight Pullman green parlor lounge car, leased from the Keokuk Junction Railway, on the end of its trains. Perhaps most astonishing, it has accommodated modern passenger specials of the AT&SF (renamed the Burlington Northern & Santa Fe Railway in 1996), pulled by the latest of diesel-electric motive power and featuring streamlined, stainless steel cars which the railway had saved for use by its board of directors and for other special purposes once it sold the rest of its passenger rolling stock to Amtrak. Even Amtrak has run a special train to the rim on this resurrected Grand Canyon Railway.

Thus, the railway to Grand Canyon, which played a role in the establishment of Grand Canyon National Park itself, has reached the 100th anniversary of the beginning of its construction and, within two years, will reach the 100th anniversary of its completion. The railroads that served some national parks, such as Yosemite, have been long abandoned and dismantled, but the Grand Canyon's historic railroad has survived and been resurrected to full operation. May it run for another century!

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